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ABSTRACT

In establishing high quality programs for young children, it is imperative that teachers focus on individual differences, growth patterns, and learning styles while providing educational experiences that develop the physical, social, emotional and cognitive domains without regard to chronological age. Research affirms that a play-oriented approach develops thinking skills, creativity, concept acquisition, and social and emotional development. Basic skills should be taught through a variety of multisensory experiences by means of self-directed activities in a classroom designed from a child's point of view. Such a classroom has maximum flexibility of space and movement. There should be individual, small group, and large group learning experiences each day, at varying levels of difficulty. Subject areas may overlap and are easily integrated. These areas provide an environment where students can actively explore and interact with other children, adults, and materials. The developmental classroom is a place where each child can learn at his own pace in a noncompetitive, nonthreatening, positive environment. In such a classroom, learning is fun and all children develop academically, socially, emotionally, and physically. (SH)

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IMPLEMENTING DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE CLASSROOMS

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In establishing high quality programs for young children, it is imperative that teachers focus on individual differences, growth patterns and learning styles while providing educational experiences that develop the physical, social, emotional and cognitive domains. Recent research (Day,1986) suggests that teachers view children as unique individuals that develop differently and at different rates. Although beginning school age is usually determined by birthdate, not all five year old children are functioning at the same academic level. Most classroom skills are designed according to chronological age. If developmental ages are less than designated chronological ages, children often experience frustration and failure in attempting to complete tasks. Careful attention to the developmental levels of the students in the classroom appears to be one of the best ways to guarantee a successful school year. No longer can educators look solely at the cognitive functioning of the child, but they must begin to provide climates that promote physical, social, emotional development in all children based on identified developmental needs and learning styles. Individual children progress through various stages of development according to experiences, physical maturity, and cognitive growth. These factors combine to determine a child's developmental level. Educators who recognize that all young children are unique will allow them to progress at their own developmental rate without regard to chronological age.

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Goals of developmental classrooms provide educational experiences so that instruction can meet the needs of each student. Developmental teachers provide opportunities for reinforcement of skills through play and integration of concepts and skills. Practices for developmental classrooms include:

- **Children are provided with opportunities to develop basic skills which are developmentally appropriate**
- **Children are provided with opportunities to develop social skills, responsibility and independence**
- **The learning environment develops self esteem in children**

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- **Children have varied opportunities to communicate**

- **Children have opportunities to learn through active exploration with concrete, manipulative and relevant learning activities**

To accomplish this, the developmental model places emphasis on a child-centered curriculum designed by teachers who understand and apply child development research to classroom practice by providing first hand experiences with learning materials that are multicultural and non-sexist. Allowing children to work on tasks at their own developmental levels will help insure a success oriented environment which provides a wide range of sequential activities at a multiple of levels in a variety of subject areas.

There has been a growing body of developmental research that has recently emerged which affirms that children learn most effectively through a concrete, play oriented approach. (NAEYC,1986) According to the research, play has been found to develop thinking skills, creativity, concept acquisition and social and emotional development. (Moyer,1987) Play develops persistence and enables children to act as decision makers and problem solvers. Play enriches the content of children's minds and the quality of their thoughts. For many children, play affords them an opportunity to release excessive energy. The teacher is responsible for providing a learning environment where active play, exploration and discovery are encouraged.

Current research indicates that basic skills should be taught through a variety of multi-sensory experiences with self-directed activities in a classroom designed for success. A developmentally appropriate teacher views the arrangement of the physical environment as an important aspect of the learning process. The physical facility should be designed from a child's point of view and should be responsive to the needs of the students in the classroom. Maximum flexibility of space and movement allows children to interact freely and to work independently. A responsive physical environment has various spaces where activities occur simultaneously and places where students learn independently or in small groups.

Bringing in comfortable, movable furniture and accessories such as lamps, bookshelves, pillows and plants offers a comfortable climate to the children. Tables and chairs should be clustered to form learning centers where children have opportunities to work with materials that reinforce basic skills. The materials in learning centers should be exciting, colorful, fun, rewarding and stimulating. Many of these activities are teacher made. These activities allow children to have hands-on experiences with materials that are sequenced and multi-leveled to provide successful learning experiences for children who differ in ability and development. Activities in learning centers should be:

- **Developmentally Appropriate**
- **Age Appropriate**
- **Sequenced and Multi-leveled**
- **Colorful, Durable and Attractive**
- **Self-directed**
- **Manipulative and Concrete**

An effective program for young children must be subtly structured so that it can be flexible. It must provide a variety of learning experiences which allow and encourage children to actively engage in the process of manipulation and discovery rather than the traditional teacher directed, pencil, paper and workbook approach to learning. Ideally, there should be individual, small group and large group learning experiences each day. At the beginning of the day, the teacher may begin with a large group activity. After a short period, the children select specific learning centers. The skills in the learning centers are at varying levels of difficulty so that all children will succeed. Learning activities in centers should take into account special areas of interest, special topics or themes, holidays and special events.

The teacher of young children has many different areas to teach. Most curriculum guides include seven main subject areas: language arts, math, social studies, science, art, music, and physical education. These subject areas tend to overlap and are easily integrated. Other areas that are appropriate for a primary classroom of include sand, water, clay, blocks, puzzles, games, manipulative toys, practical living and woodworking. Integrated activities within these areas allow for opportunities to reflect on the natural ways in which children connect experiences. Effective teachers provide an environment where students can actively explore and interact with other children, adults, and materials.

The effective teacher provides an environment that provides for the following:

- **Promotes an environment that is positive, successful and enhances self esteem**
- **Provides opportunities for development of the whole child to include social, emotional, physical,cognitive**
- **Designs realistic curriculum goals and objectives**
- **Provides instruction based on developmental levels**
- **Provides multiple opportunities for practice with concrete, manipulative objects**
- **Views play as fundamental to learning**
- **Provides opportunities for multi-cultural and non-sexist experiences**
- **Adapts the program to meet the needs of "special" children**

The developmental classroom provides a place where each child can learn at his own pace in a non-competitive, non-threatening, positive environment where learning is fun. The main goal for a developmental classroom is that all children will be able to develop not only academically, but socially, emotionally and physically. The program must be designed for the total child. Developmental classrooms are alive and full of movement. Children are learning in natural ways. The teacher exhibits understanding, enthusiasm and patience. These qualities provide quality learning experiences for all students.

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